

# Mimesis and *Bilderverbot*

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Critical Theory has traditionally been held to have had a bad relationship to cinema and film, or at least a very critical one. If in the following I nevertheless attempt to prove the topicality of Critical Theory in this area, then I understand this attempt not only as 'redemptive criticism' in the sense given the term by Walter Benjamin (who could lay most claim to have created a critical film theory), but also as an attempt to mediate between extremes: for a theory of images, and thus of film, these extremes would be the twin poles of mimesis and *Bilderverbot* (the ban on graven images).

Mimesis and *Bilderverbot* crop up in Adorno's thought in differing constellations. I wish to investigate those lines leading towards aesthetic debate, which, although similar to his approaches to cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis, nevertheless lead away from the analysis of the commodity form given in the chapter on the 'Culture Industry' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>1</sup>

Where film theory refers to Critical Theory it is usually by focusing on two diametrically opposed essays: Benjamin's 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction',<sup>2</sup> and the 'Culture Industry' chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the latter the mimetic capacity coagulates into the compulsion which supposedly makes consumers conform to the images of themselves which the culture industry creates and which depth psychology then dredges up as its core in its 'concepts of order':

the whole inner life as classified by the now somewhat devalued depth psychology bear[s] witness to man's attempt to make himself a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the culture industry. The most intimate

- 1 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979) (first published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944)
- 2 Walter Benjamin: 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1936) in *Illuminations* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970)

reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion – personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.<sup>3</sup>

3 Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* p. 167

The sublation of the difference between product and consumer, between appearance and reality, between individual subject and society takes place in the ‘steel bath of fun’ (*‘Stahlbad des Fun’*), everything is struck with the bane of similarity, ‘subsumed by identity’

In the course of the societal process, the embodiments of the culture industry become ‘the flesh and blood of the public’, aesthetic sublimation of the denigration of drives is replaced by mere suppression, by the reduction to foreplay, by the eternalization of the threat of castration. Under total domination, any difference between nature and society ceases to exist since society posits itself as nature. Human beings are reduced to hollowed-out monads onto which the machinery of the culture industry stamps its imprint.

One could say polemically that Adorno and Horkheimer never come as close to Fromm’s much criticized culturalist concept as they do in the chapter on the culture industry – although not so much in Fromm’s humanist sense, rather in the sense of a negative cultural critique: negative culturalism. In 1963, Adorno responded to his critics in a lecture entitled ‘Culture industry reconsidered’.<sup>4</sup> Although he retained the analysis of the fetish character of commodities of the culture industry, he nevertheless somewhat modified the thesis of a complete identity between product and recipient:

Only their deep unconscious mistrust, the last residue of the difference between art and empirical reality in the spiritual make-up of the masses explains why they have not, to a person, long since perceived and accepted the world as it is constructed for them by the culture industry.<sup>5</sup>

4 Theodor Adorno, ‘Culture industry reconsidered’, in J. M. Bernstein (ed.) *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge 1991), pp. 85–94. Translation by Anson G. Rabinbach, *New German Critique* no. 6 (1975), pp. 12–19.

5 *Ibid.* p. 91

The fissure in the monolithic worldview of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which emerges here arises from a renewed recourse to the unconscious as opposition to manipulated consciousness. In fact, it is one of the basic assumptions of Critical Theory that instinctual drives provide a presocietal potential against the totalitarian claims of the societal process. Adorno, admittedly, never went as far as Marcuse, who in *Eros and Civilization* spelled out a positive social model on the basis of instinctual nature.<sup>6</sup> For him, art and the aesthetic experience formed the only oppositional expressive medium left to an oppressed and fettered nature faced by social

6 Herbert Marcuse *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press 1955)

restrictions and conditioning Art is the wound that breaks open at the edges where nature and society rub against each other. It is to my mind, therefore, not accidental that in those instances where Adorno analyses film from the perspective of aesthetics rather than from that of the primacy of the economy and commodity fetishism, such as in 'Transparencies on film', the concept of experience stands at the centre.

Irrespective of the technological origins of the cinema, the aesthetics of film will do better to base itself on a subjective mode of experience which film resembles and which constitutes its artistic character. A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience colourful images of landscapes coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams. These images do not merge into one another in a continuous flow, but are rather set off against each other in the course of their appearance, much like the magic lantern slides of our childhood. It is in the discontinuity of that movement that the images of the interior monologue resemble the phenomenon of writing: the latter similarly moving before our eyes while fixed in its discrete sign. Such movement of interior images may be to film what the visible world is to painting or the acoustic world to music. As the objectifying recreation of this type of experience, film may become art. The technological medium par excellence is thus intimately related to the beauty of nature (*tief verwandt dem Naturschönen*).<sup>7</sup>

7 Adorno 'Transparencies on film'  
*The Culture Industry* p. 156  
 Translation by Thomas Y. Levin  
*New German Critique* nos. 24/5  
 (1981/2)

What is striking in this passage is that Adorno conceives of aesthetic experience as taking place as part of an analysis of inner and external nature, and that this should form the basis for an aesthetics of film. The analogy between film and writing is conceived in phenomenological terms: the comparison refers to the graphemes of writing in terms of their mimetic reproduction and not to their status as language.

To me it is no coincidence that in the inner circle of Critical Theory (and beyond) from Benjamin to Adorno (and Kracauer) the materiality of the film image is grounded phenomenologically rather than symbolically. Critical Theory adopts a psychoanalysis which focuses on a 'naturalist' theory of instinctual drives, thus blurring any dividing line between it and anthropology. It is this which leads to Critical Theory's insights into a prelinguistic realm of human experience. It is in this context that the concept of mimesis, which occurs so frequently in Adorno's work, finds its place. Whereas gesture is defined by social codes and conventions (that is to say, a quasi-linguistic model of achieving communication), mimetic expression constitutes, according to Helmuth Plessner,

a meaning in that it mirrors an emotion (a state or sudden welling-up of internal turmoil) [ . . . ] In mimetic expression psychic

content and physical form relate to one another as two inseparable poles of one unity and cannot be detached from one another and framed in a relationship of signifier and signified (of shell and core), without destroying their organic, immediate and spontaneous quality.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Helmuth Plessner *Philosophische Anthropologie* (Frankfurt Suhrkamp 1970) pp 61–63

One of the well-known characteristics to be observed in actors in silent movies was that they relied overmuch on gesture, on acting in an exaggerated and theatrical style, but they did not utilize mimetic means. Actors from the era of silent films whom we still admire today, such as Asta Nielsen, excelled precisely because they possessed such a mimetic facility, in which what they wished to express merged with their physical appearance. Adorno describes the traits of early childhood in mimetic expression in terms of the transition from a quasi-natural to a linguistic state. In his essay, '*Zweimal Chaplin*' he writes:

Psychoanalysis attempts to relate the figure of the clown to reactions in the earliest period of childhood prior to the ego having taken a definite shape. Whatever the case, we will certainly learn more about the figure of the clown from children who communicate as mysteriously with the image he creates as they do with animals than we will be searching for a meaning in his actions which are designed precisely to negate meaning. Only if we knew this language shared by clown and children alike, a language which does not aspire to the generation of meaning, would we understand this figure in which nature bids farewell in shock-like fashion.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Zweimal Chaplin* in Theodor Adorno *Ohne Leitbild Parva Aesthetica* (Frankfurt Suhrkamp 1967) p 90

This is not too far removed from what happens with comedians like Laurel and Hardy, who fail to recognize the feet protruding from underneath the bedspread as their own and, full of fear, start chasing the stranger – not unlike that cat that tries to bite its own tail. Film as a medium seems to be suited in a particular way to the presentation of such physical mimetic expressions – unlike the theatre, which has to resort to enlarged, over-obvious interpretative gestures, to conscious stylization. One might in general therefore consider whether film is not a medium which offers the aesthetic opportunity to objectify modes of experience pertaining to the time prior to 'the ego having taken a definite shape'. In film, the 'movement of images before the inner eye', the 'aspect of reality free of all machinery' (Benjamin) create a smooth symbiotic sense of blending together, of dissolution into images and their movement. Raising one's eyes, changing one's field of vision, the tentative feeling conveyed by a subjective shot, or the feeling of sudden free-fall as an optic sensation, all repeat crucial optical, motor experiences related to those first laborious efforts that every human being makes when learning to walk upright rather than crawl. In this

process, the gaze is directed towards objects which the hand tries to grasp but fails to reach

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno specifies that one of the modern traits of art consisted in the fact that,

The relation between the viewer and work had nothing to do with the incorporation of art by the viewer. On the contrary, the viewer seemed to vanish in the work of art. This holds *a fortiori* for the products of modern art that come at the viewer sometimes like train engines in a film <sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Theodor Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1984) p. 19

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Fruchtl *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg 1986)

In happier moments, the mimetic impulse – the compulsion in the culture industry to conform to a false image – becomes the fulfilment of a prelinguistic, non-repressive appropriation and transformation of nature in the enigmatic ‘image’. If, as Josef Fruchtl has shown in his work on Adorno’s concept of mimesis,<sup>11</sup> this concept depends on the respective constellations which regulate its switching over from compulsive conformity into playful assimilation, then it is significant that this ambivalent structuring of the concept is not applicable with respect to the *Bilderverbot*. Adorno speaks of such a ban on graven images in terms of its constituting a boundary in human cultural history which we cannot cross back over. This seems surprising not least because at first glance the primacy of the *Bilderverbot* and a stringent interpretation of the concept of mimesis would appear to be mutually exclusive, after all, the ban prohibits precisely that production of likeness on which the mimetic impulse rests. The enigmatic image is, however, that image which does not rely on mirror-like similarity, whereas the culture industry produces images which mirror the second nature of society and thus assert a positive similarity. In this manner, such images contravene the *Bilderverbot* just as positivism violates immanent negation. The origin of the ban is linked to taboos: it stems from a ‘prehistory’, whence mimesis also emanates. In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno not only binds together mimesis, *Bilderverbot* and taboos into a temporal context, but he also describes their interconnection as indebted to a temporal problem: that of duration and death

One of the aspects of art that date back to primeval times is the notion of the duration of the transient. It is a concept that among other things perpetuates the mimetic heritage. Quite a few scholars have stressed the fact that a picture, irrespective of its specific content, is first of all a phenomenon of regeneration.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* p. 392

Adorno continues by quoting Frobenius, a cultural anthropologist:

These pictures are attempts to immortalize the animals; they are like eternal stars in the sky.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

The problem of duration resides precisely in this aspect of

eternalization, which, Adorno suggests, 'in the spirit of the prohibition of graven images [*Bilderverbot*], duration engendered guilt feelings toward the living' Furthermore, the 'reluctance to portray people' stems from magical thought which believes that in the image something of the entity portrayed takes on substantive shape; that, like a voodoo doll the image can strike back at the person depicted The mummy is the first stop on the path of the transformation of the magical fear of the revenge of the dead Referring to research in cultural anthropology, Adorno conceives of mummies as the first sign of the development of an 'idea of aesthetic duration', an attempt to bestow the dead with permanence among the living: 'reification of what was once living' as the 'revolt against death' <sup>14</sup>

14 *Ibid* p 393

There is thus an ambiguity at work in the interpretation of the *Bilderverbot* as it is anticipated in 'prehistory', prior to the emergence of Jewish monotheism On the one hand, it leads to magical injury and destruction of the image or some of its parts in order to placate the animistic heritage in it; on the other, it leads, as is evidenced by the following description given by one of the cultural anthropologists Adorno cites, to the depiction's autonomy *vis-à-vis* that which is depicted:

Speiser interprets this shift as a 'transition from the idea of preserving the dead and of simulating their bodily presence to that of merely hinting symbolically at their presence', which marks the transition to the statue <sup>15</sup>

15 *Ibid*

While Adorno's aesthetics can be joined to a certain variant of the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, one can also find arguments which relate to the beginnings of art in the cult of the dead in Bazin's derivation of a theory of images. In his influential essay, 'The ontology of the photographic image', Bazin starts with the art of mummification which for him is the first form of pictorial art. 'The first Egyptian statue, then, was a mummy, tanned and petrified in sodium'.<sup>16</sup> It is true that Bazin draws diametrically opposed conclusions from the genetic facts of the case since the mummy had to be protected from grave robbers by the company of terracotta statues, the image of man maintained its place as the saving shadow on the way to eternity; the art of the image was created to protect man from destruction by time and death Liberated from 'anthropological utilitarianism', the production of images came in the end to be interested above all in the production of a likeness. 'If the history of the plastic arts is less a matter of their aesthetic than of their psychology then it will be seen to be essentially the story of resemblance, or, if you will, of realism' <sup>17</sup>

16 André Bazin 'The ontology of the photographic image' in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press 1971) p 9

17 *Ibid*, p 10

Above all, Bazin is interested in an argument which is also taken up by Kracauer, an argument which is connected with the question of whether, in the spirit of phenomenology, there exists such a thing

as the unmediated contemplation of an object. Bazin, like Kracauer, discovers for film (as previously for photography): 'Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified, as it were'<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this possibility is only permitted by technology, by the subjectification of the lens (*Objektiv*) which can bear witness not only to mere likeness but to the physical presence of the object at a given moment in time.

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer.<sup>19</sup>

Now it is an intriguing question how far such a revealing 'objectness' which is transmitted by an apparatus can still be brought into relation with the old problem of making images; and, in passing, it is interesting to note that, independently, the Catholic Bazin and the Jewish Kracauer introduce into the same ontological phenomenon a theological idea of salvation which is based on a category of movement in time (*Verzeitlichung*). The exploding of a moment of time, which also plays such an important part in Benjamin's short agenda for a film aesthetics, replaces the problem of reproduction

For simulation, via symbolic intimation, to the autonomy of the depiction, and thus also to the conception in which the images finally converge: the *Bulderverbot* has, since magical prehistory, played the part of the herald of the development of aesthetic autonomy.

If one considers the impact the Jewish *Bulderverbot* has on the history of art, then one finds oneself in similar tangles. Babylon's various oriental mysticisms were still dominated by the clear notion of the presence of the depicted in the depiction. In other words, the image was, given the likeness to God, itself godly – God was substantiated in it: a magical conjuring-up which could only lead to prohibited idolatry, to the forbidden. We therefore read in the Talmud that 'all faces may be portrayed – except the human countenance', and the Zohar concludes from this that 'the human countenance exerts rule over all things'. Exodus 20.4 prohibits images being made of that which 'is in heaven above, or that is in earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth'. Adhering to this ban led in Jewish religious art to various interpretations which all arose in connection with the Book of Genesis and which adjudicate on relations of similarity

If one surveys the debates in art and religious history, then the problem appears quite plausibly to be one which led with a certain intrinsic logic to an ever increasing autonomy of the depiction *vis-à-vis* the depicted.<sup>20</sup> In line with gnostic conceptions, where an image of the likeness of God is itself godly, then only images which bore

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p 15

<sup>19</sup> Ibid p 14

<sup>20</sup> I refer in the following to the results of recent debates presented by Malka Rosenthal. My approach owes much to this essay and the quotations from the Talmud and the Zohar are taken from it. See Malka Rosenthal 'Mach dir kein Bildnis (Ex 20.4) und Im Ebenbild erschaffen (Gen 1.26ff.) Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der jüdischen Ikonophobie im Mittelalter' Zofia Amersinowa 'Das messianische Gastmahl der Gerechten in einer hebräischen Bibel aus dem 13. Jahrhundert' Ein Beitrag zur eschatologischen Ikonographie bei den Juden in Lieselotte Kotzschke and Peter von der Osten Sacken (eds) *Wenn der Messias kommt: Das jüdisch-christliche Verhältnis im Spiegel mittelalterlicher Kunst* Veröffentlichungen aus dem Institut Kirche und Judentum vol 16 (Berlin 1984)

no likeness could be made: images which would, in other words, be neither of objects in the heavens, nor on earth, nor in the water, and could thus not lead to idolatry. The Babylonian and later the cabbalist gnostics wrestled with the problem of likeness which – once the modernized version of the interpretation of Exodus 20.4 as a ban on graven images of what was on high, that is, of God, had gained the upper hand – was of only marginal significance in the medieval world

The gnostic variant on the *Bilderverbot*, which amounts to a determinate negation in the image of everything which actually exists, is linked in a quite astonishing manner to the aesthetics of modernism. It therefore seems not coincidental that the work of Benjamin and Kafka, in however intricate a fashion, referred to or can be related to cabbalistic figures of thought. I am less concerned here whether, historically speaking, Scholem, Benjamin or Kafka had a knowledge of cabbalist mysticism and Jewish theology which corresponded to the state of research at the time: nor do I wish to relate Critical Theory back to Jewish mysticism. Rather, I wish to show that the idea of a *Bilderverbot* such as is applied by Critical Theory – probably influenced by debates on motifs in Jewish mysticism – produces a regulatory effect when referred back to the concept of mimesis and image theory.

In the *Traumprotokolle* (Protocols of Dreams) in the entry of 12 November, 1955, Adorno commits to paper a so-called 'examination dream' which refers to the ban in a cunning manner. The dreamer is to take his final exams in sociology, specifically in empirical social research. The answers to the questions on empirical techniques and concepts are all wrong. There would also appear to be difficulties with the English. But the Freudian logic of an examination dream is, after all, to curb the fear of the impending examination by remembering earlier exams which one had endured and eventually sat successfully, and the protocol is also structured in terms of such a binary division

Out of pity at my ignorance the examiner declared he would now question me on cultural history. He held up a German passport from 1879. At the back of it I read a parting farewell 'Now go out into the world with you, little Wolfie!' This motto was formed in gold leaf. I was asked what was special about this. I went into a longwinded exposition on the fact that the use of gold for such purposes dated back to Russian and Byzantine icons. The *Bilderverbot* was taken very seriously in those days: it held true for everything except gold, the purest of metals. Gold then went on to be used in pictorial images on Baroque ceilings, then as inlays on furniture, and the golden writing in the passport was the last vestige of this great tradition. My profound knowledge was greeted with enthusiasm and I had passed the exam.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Theodor Adorno  
Traumprotokolle in *Gesammelte  
Schriften* 20.2 (Frankfurt  
Suhrkamp 1986) p. 578



We can easily discern within this dream protocol a move from the image to writing via the 'great tradition' of the *Bilderverbot*. Adorno's attempt to rescue the film in aesthetic terms takes a similar course when in the 'Transparencies on film', as I mentioned above, he draws the analogy between the aesthetics of film and writing. To quote it again:

It is in the discontinuity of that movement that the images of the interior monologue resemble the phenomenon of writing: the latter similarly moving before our eyes while fixed in its discrete sign. Such movement of interior images may be to film what the visible world is to painting or the acoustic world to music.<sup>22</sup>

22 Adorno Transparencies on film  
p 156

The pictorial image would appear to be the legitimate heir to natural beauty, whose advocate Adorno would dearly like film to be, but only to the extent that it has made itself resemble writing, has taken its leave of a purely depictive function. This notion is again coupled to the idea of the *Bilderverbot* in a lengthier passage in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The justness of the image is preserved in the faithful pursuit of its prohibition. This pursuit, 'determinate negation' does not receive from the sovereignty of the abstract concept any immunity against corrupting intuition, as does skepticism, to which both true and false are equally vain. Determinate negation rejects the defective ideas of the absolute, the idols, differently than does rigorism, which confronts them with the Idea that they cannot match up to. Dialectic, on the contrary, interprets every image as writing.<sup>23</sup>

23 Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* p 24

As I have tried to show, the concept of 'determinate negation' which is formed in the course of the *Bilderverbot* originates in a radicalized version of the ban on graven images presented in the Book of Genesis and binding among gnostic currents. Fragmented figures, such as cherubs that consist only of a head and wings are to be found in the figurative depictions of medieval Jewish art. These are hybrid beings composed of human and animal shapes which abide quite strictly by the ban which prohibits any relation of likeness precisely owing to Creation's likeness to God. They are depictions that in some curious way have carried out the 'determinate negation' of empirical matter without degenerating into iconoclasm. The modernity of these depictions – which point to characteristics which Benjamin not accidentally finds again as the form of allegory in Baroque tragic drama – is closely connected with the prohibition on showing the whole figure, whose perfection would signify a likeness to God: fragmentation, the image as 'unsensuous likeness', successfully generates such mimesis as would be compatible with the *Bilderverbot*.

The developmental line which extends from the taboo on images to the monotheist *Bilderverbot* clearly does not stop short at

theology, but, in the latest stages, in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, is radically secularized, acquiring a dimension that leads to the autonomy of the aesthetic:

the Old Testament prohibition of graven images (*Bilderverbot*) can be said to have an aesthetic aspect besides the theological one. The interdiction against forming an image – of something – in effect implies the proposition that such an image is impossible to form. Through duplication in art, the appearing quality in nature loses its being-in-itself on which appreciation of nature feeds. Art remains loyal to nature's appearing quality only where it conjures up natural sceneries in the artistic expression of their negativity.<sup>24</sup>

24 Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* p. 100

Natural beauty in itself, as it is expressed in an image by way of determinate negation, is an allegory of society, and thus itself a cipher of the social domination of nature. There is a passage in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a book which itself inexhaustibly produces images, which sums this up in an image:

The appeal to the sun is idolatry. The sight of the burning tree inspires a vision of the majesty of the day which lights the world without setting fire to it at the same time.<sup>25</sup>

25 Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* p. 219

Determinate negation (*bestimmte Negation*) reserves a place for utopia, negation (*Verneinung*) is the precondition for the possibility of difference.

Yet how is an aesthetic theory which derives 'profane revelation' from the determinate negation of the gnostic *Bilderverbot* compatible with the nature of film, which is a means of mechanical reproduction? Are not filmic images always duplications in a quite technical sense, images of something, something which moves in front of the camera? Does not the atavistic fear of being robbed of part of one's person through its capture on film not receive a secular significance here? Are there not characteristics of film which resist the transformation into writing in the sense that Adorno proposed? Are the neofundamentalist Jewish sects not perhaps correct in considering film a violation of the *Bilderverbot*?

The path taken by the culture industry in producing images would seem to lend support to this argument. Technical reproducibility, the illusionistic character of the filmic image which appears to be real, spell danger to the *Bilderverbot*. The diva becomes divine, an idol, a fetish which is part of domination. The separation of arguments about film aesthetics from the analysis of commodity fetishism brings both strands into opposition with each other, steering a course that leads into one of the many antinomies of Critical Theory without, in this instance, sublating that antinomy dialectically. Adorno's proposals for a theory of film which bring him closer to the work of Benjamin, and, in particular, Kracauer, contradict and partly refute

the theses put forward in the chapter on the culture industry. The film aesthetic argument links individual images and montage by way of the regulatory idea of the *Bilderverbot* as the rendering of individual's 'prehistoric' images in writing, images the mimetic qualities of which still contain in unstructured form all the ambiguities of the mythical 'prehistory' and its magical practices. The emphasis placed on this form of rendering images as 'writing' is to be found in the work of avant-garde filmmakers from Eisenstein up to the present. They also were concerned with breaking the fetish character of a cinema of illusions, with enabling the individual image to be freed from an intentional framing in the closed, mythical structure of narrative cinema and with transforming it instead into the intentionless *objet trouvé* so that it becomes 'an aspect of reality free of all machinery' (Benjamin). Theories of montage provide the theoretical foundations for rendering individual images as writing

It is no accident that Alexander Kluge, who himself grew up in the thick of the Critical Theorists' ambivalence towards images, describes his own film aesthetic practice in this context

*Kluge:* Yes, we will not ease our efforts. These metamorphoses, this simultaneous synchronicity, are a single element. The other epiphany – that is to say, a shot, then a second shot, neither constituting the image – they violate each other by the contrast between them, by their difference or their tautology. And thus a third image emerges which is latent in the cut and is not itself material. The third image is the silent Ideal that has long since existed in the audience.

*Koch:* Then the third image is the utopia which follows the *Bilderverbot*?

*Kluge:* In a literal sense, because it does not exist.<sup>26</sup>

Yet it is not only avant-garde film which adopts such an approach. Ideology critique in film has also been strengthened by feminist film theory. Here, too, the focus is on the concept of the fetish, whereby clear reference is made to Freudian theory with the fetish then being interpreted as a sign of the stubborn strategy of the denial of the female gender, which, in a culture based on patriarchy, falls victim to contempt and repression, thus forming a syndrome. Denying sexual difference under the threat of castration leads precisely to that form of fetish production which the *Bilderverbot* was once levelled against. If the whole of humanity is formed in the image of a single gender, then everything has the similarity of the fetish stamped upon it. To this extent, feminist film theory also rests on considerations which are opposed to the developmental logic which lies behind fetishization and assumptions of identity.

The position in ideology critique taken up by feminist film theory thus leads to similar aporia, but above all to similar aesthetic viewpoints, which – in contesting a narrative cinema determined by

<sup>26</sup> Gertrud Koch: Die Funktion des Zerrwinkels in zertrummender Absicht: ein Gespräch mit Alexander Kluge, in: R. Erd et al. (eds): Kritische Theorie und Kultur (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989) p. 116

the fetish character of patriarchal culture – aligns itself with the avant garde. Critical Theory is evidently still topical in the realms of film and film theory, yet the productive development of a film-theoretical mediation between the extremes of mimesis and *Bilderverbot* has still to be put into practice. In this respect, if we disregard a few beginnings, Critical Theory still offers a programme for film theory and aesthetics which has yet to be achieved.

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